



This Old Column

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Building Research

Building research is one of the most confusing and mysterious components of historic preservation. A simple question like "how old is my house?" can result in an extensive search through a myriad of resources.

Getting started is the toughest part of the entire process. Keep in mind that there are two components of house research. First, gather all the simple, readily available information on the house that you can. Second, do thorough, in-depth research into what you found in that information. Beware of speculation. More mistakes are made from hasty research and faulty justifications such as "they would have done it this way."

The key to house research is gathering information on the three A's: age, associations and alterations.

Age places your house in the concept of history.

Age of the structure can be estimated through Sanborn Insurance Maps, city directories (no listing for that address can possibly mean that it has not been built yet) or an abstract (if you are fortunate enough to receive one from a past owner or title company.) The earliest Sanborn map ever done for Indianapolis dates back to 1887 and shows basic outlines of homes in the city. Sanborns are found at the Indiana Historical Society, the city Microfilm Archives and some are in the IHPC office.

Association gives "personality" to your house's history.

With city directories, which are located at the Marion County Central Library, you can discover past residents of your home. Directories extend back into the late 1800's and are organized by name and address, but be careful, a listing is for a resident and does not necessarily mean the owner. Research into the biographies of these people may uncover a significant association with past people or events.

Alteration, when understood, is the measuring stick of how your house has grown.

Sanborn maps indicate a plan drawing of structures which, through comparison, can reveal certain alterations and additions. Alterations can also be investigated by looking at old photos, talking to past residents, or a careful examination of the structure. When examining the structure, look for changes in texture, scale and materials for hints as to what use to be.